

# RETURN TO MELOS: FACING THE REALITY OF HOW THINGS ARE, IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND IT BETTER



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After Thucydides 5.84-116.

[In 416 BCE, during a pause in the long war between Athens and Sparta, an Athenian fleet arrived at the small neutral city of Melos and demanded that the Melians should surrender unconditionally or be destroyed. The contemporary writer Thucydides - who is seen today as a political theorist as much as a historian - presents a debate in which the representatives of the Melians seek to persuade the Athenians to be more moderate. This 'Melian Dialogue' is regularly cited by modern International Relations theorists and others, applying it to any number of different situations: US foreign policy, the Russia annexation of Crimea, the behaviour of Germany in the 2015 Euro crisis. Yanis Varoufakis has taken the title of his new book on the latter theme, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?*, from a nineteenth-century translation of one key line from the Dialogue: 'The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must'.]

We are where we are. Nowhere special; not Athens, not Rome or London or Paris, or New York or Moscow. A long way from the centre; out on the periphery, in the banlieues, on the wrong side of the tracks, in an ordinary house or classroom or cell. But not no place; actually a very specific and familiar place, in an all-too-familiar situation - which will be different for each of us.

There is conflict; there's always conflict. There is power, and as always it is very unevenly distributed. The ones with power issue unreasonable demands, and expect absolute compliance; the ones without power try to respond.

You can fill in the details - and change the pronouns - as seems most appropriate and useful for your situation. But always remember that these are people speaking, not philosophical abstractions, even if your chosen situation is the confrontation between global capital and the workers, or imperial power and the colonised, rather than between policeman and ordinary citizen or husband and wife or bully and bullied.

A: Well? What do you say? We don't have all night.

B: How can we have a proper discussion when you're holding a gun to our heads? If we win the argument and refuse to give in to you, you destroy us; if we give in, we become your slaves.

A: I don't see any mileage in a discussion of hypotheticals. And I'm not going to dress this up by saying that we have the right to rule because we spread freedom and civilisation. You just have to face the facts. You know as well as I do that arguments about justice and rights and right and wrong count only between people with equal power. In the real world, the strong lay down the law and the weak just suck it up.

B: If you're not prepared to talk about principles, then you should at least see that there's real advantage in showing pity on those weaker than you. What goes around comes around. When you find yourselves in this position, the retribution will be twice as hard because of the example you've set. They'll say you had it coming.

A: Hypotheticals again. We'll take that as it comes. Anyway, our enemies aren't the real threat; actually that's our subjects and our so-called allies, if they ever felt strong enough to take us on. Not your concern. Bottom line: you submit, you don't cause us any trouble, and that benefits both of us.

B: It suits you very well. How do we benefit from being your slaves?

A: You get to live.

Pause

## WE KNOW YOU'RE STRONGER THAN US. BUT WE'RE STANDING UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT, AND THAT COUNTS FOR SOMETHING

B: We'd be happy to keep out of this altogether. Just friends, no hard feelings.

A: Not an option. If we let you off, everyone else will see that as a sign of weakness. The more you hate us, the more it shows our strength.

B: That's crazy. Anyone can see that we're not disrespecting you, we're just keeping our heads down.

A: That's not how it works. We have to show that we're strong, or they'll think we're weak. We make an example of you, and it shows we mean business.

B: But you'll make enemies of every neutral. No one will be able to trust you; they'll take one look at this situation, and think that it's just a matter of time before you turn on them too. How does that make you safe?

A: Not every enemy is an actual threat; most of them aren't going to cause us any trouble. But people like you could do something reckless, and give others ideas. We can't risk that.

B: If you're ready to take that sort of risk to protect your position, you must see why we'd be pathetic cowards not to stand up to you.

A: Open your eyes, kids. This isn't a pissing match where you get to show off your manly courage and defend your honour. It's a simple matter of self-preservation: don't resist those who are far stronger than you.

B: Things can go either way in a fight. Maybe the odds are more even than you'd expect from weighing up the two sides. If we give in now, we lose all hope; as long as we resist, we have something to hope for.

## SELF-INTEREST IS ABOUT SECURITY. YOUR FRIENDS ARE THE LAST PEOPLE TO STICK THEIR NECKS OUT FOR ABSTRACT PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE AND HONOUR

A: Hope? Always a great comfort in danger. Not a problem if you've got something solid to back it up, but if all you've got is hope... Your lives are in the balance here. Your hope could lead you into disaster.

B: We know you're stronger than us. But we're standing up for what's right, and that counts for something, with God and with the rest of the world. And there are people who will back us up, as a matter of honour.

A: You think that God's on your side? Why should he support you rather than us? It's clearly a law of nature that anyone who has the upper hand will take advantage of it. We didn't invent that, we just recognised that this is how the world is. We follow that law, knowing that you and anyone else would do the same if you could, and that it'll still be true long after we're gone. As for your faith in your friends and their honour, well, good luck with that. People are pretty good at seeing what's right in terms of what's in their interest. That's not going to help you.

B: No, that's exactly why they'll help us. They're not going to leave us in the lurch, and lose the trust of their friends and at the same time strengthen their enemies.

A: You just don't get it. Self-interest is about security. Your friends are the last people to stick their necks out for abstract principles of justice and honour.

B: You're wrong.

A: Could be. But that's not going to stop us. You know, the whole point of this was to talk about your safety, and I haven't heard anything about that. Hope, that's all you have to offer. People in your situation can go a bit crazy; you can be completely aware of the danger you're in, and still insist on signing your own death warrants because of this thing called 'honour'. What could be more dishonourable than losing everything because of your own stupidity? There's no dishonour in submitting to a superior power that's offering reasonable terms. There's one sure recipe for success in this world: stand up to your equals, defer to your superiors and be moderate towards your inferiors. And know where you stand.

B: We're not going to give up our freedom. We trust in God, and in our friends, and in ourselves. Let us stay neutral, and let's reach an agreement that suits both of us.

A: You must be the only people on earth who think that what might happen in future is clearer than what's right in front of you. You've staked everything on trust, chance and hope. And you're going to lose it all.

How does it end? The way it always ends, and always will end, until the world gets remade; the way the Paris Commune, the Arab Spring and Syriza's resistance ended. The Melians fought; they lost; the men were killed, and the women and children sold into slavery. This is not a text for idealists or optimists, but for those who are prepared to face the reality of how things are, in order to understand it better.

Of course, no ending is final. You can read further on, and see how the powerful come to grief in turn, in part because of their confidence in their own power. Does that retrospectively justify the choice of the powerless to offer doomed resistance? That remains open to debate.

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## ALSO IN DISCLAIMER

### WE SHOULDN'T TREAT DEMOCRACY LIKE A RELIGION. IT NEEDS TO EVOLVE.

No one can tell whether leaving the EU was a right or wrong decision but there's a persistent view that if only "the people" had direct powers of democratic action then sensible, progressive and morally-considered laws would result. Let's start to look at how we can make democracy work better.

### POST-REFERENDUM THOUGHTS: WE MUST UNITE IN THIS TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

We are left facing a new level of unprecedented uncertainty. Our country is divided into two and xenophobic language is poisoning the split further. As we enter this strange new world we can only hope that we have a strength of leadership and community to bring our nation back together.

### REFERENDUM REACTION: WE ARE NOW IN UNCHARTED WATERS. AND A DIFFERENT COUNTRY

Against all expectations Britain has narrowly voted to leave the European Union. It is the event of our political generation and politics is now in unfamiliar territory. Disclaimer reacts.

### AFTER THIS REFERENDUM CAN WE FIND ANY CONSOLATION IN HISTORY?

The future is unknowable, but there's a big difference between stepping into it cautiously, with a clear sense of possible risks and of our own limitations, and striding boldly into the darkness without checking that there's a floor.